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Boredom in the classroom: **Poison or stimulant?**

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Kathryn Driver is one of the Deans of the Middle School and a History teacher. She has an MA in History and is interested in the teaching of History for the purposes of fostering critical thinking, developing empathy and exploring the formation of identity. She is passionate about Russian history and the unique development of that state. She has presented on PBL approaches at an AIS History Conference. Kathryn was also responsible for co-leading a Project Group set up to consider best practice in pastoral care as Barker moves towards comprehensive coeducation.

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Boredom in the classroom: Poison or stimulant?

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Abstract

Boredom is a state or a trait that is almost universally considered undesirable. It is a term that was born from an industrial age and is said to be experienced particularly by adolescents in high school. In the classroom, it has been seen as antithetical to student engagement and learning. In this sense, it is certainly something to be avoided. Rather than by becoming more entertaining, this article describes how teachers can work to reduce boredom by providing students with some autonomy and making the relevance of tasks visible. However, it will also be argued that boredom is an inevitable experience that should be embraced and even manufactured by teachers to promote endurance, creativity and reflection.

Anyone? Anyone?

In 1930, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, in an effort to alleviate the effects of the... Anyone? Anyone?... the Great Depression, passed the... Anyone? Anyone?... the tariff bill. The Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act which... Anyone? Raised or lowered?... raised tariffs, in an effort to collect more revenue for the Federal Government...

And so the scene from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) goes, a monologue given by Bueller's Economics teacher to a class whose slack-mouthed, glazed-eye reactions tell us what we instinctively know: that boring teachers who say boring things in a boring way will manufacture total disengagement. This scene and our own similar experiences as students and educators, remind us that boredom constitutes failure. Of course, we want to avoid being boring teachers, but I wonder if there something in this fairly modern construct that we can utilise to enrich our teaching and equip our students for life beyond school?

What is Boredom?

Various definitions of boredom have been postulated by philosophers, psychologists and educators. Shaw defines boredom as 'a state of understimulation, underarousal, lack of momentum, or a lack of psychological involvement associated with dissatisfaction in the task situation' (Belton & Priyadharshini 2007, p. 580). Fallis and Opatow state that in education, boring stands for a 'one-way, top-down, unengaged relationship with a teacher whose pedagogy feels disrespectful because it is not designed to tempt, engage or include students' (Belton & Priyadharshini 2007, p. 586). Mann and Robinson put it succinctly and simply: 'boredom is the result of having nothing to do that one likes' (Weinerman & Kenner 2016, p. 19).

These definitions point to the undesirable nature of boredom and the fact that its undesirability is found in the perception of those who experience it. When the student feels under stimulated,

they experience dissatisfaction. When material does not tempt them, this is subjective to the student and not necessarily inherent in the task or teacher. This is important to note as we explore ways we can alleviate boredom in the classroom and as we consider how we could re-construct the concept for good.

The Advent of Boredom

The word 'boredom' was first used in the English language in 1750. Of course, this doesn't mean that this condition hadn't been experienced beforehand, but it was a concept born out of a modern, liberal, industrial age in the Western world. Boredom arose from the homogeneity and speed that were integral to this age. Individuals began to feel they were passive spectators rather than actors with agency, who had a greater degree of certainty in their jobs and in their lives. A sense of helplessness, a lack of meaning, a feeling of predictability and inevitability about the future fed this concept of boredom.

Some have argued that boredom is particularly associated with adolescence and the advent of the teenager, also a modern construct. This is because adolescents have a peculiar experience of increased independence alongside adult-imposed constraint. Bernstein (2007) notes that there was a rise in the numbers of young people suffering from chronic boredom in the 1970s as they experienced growing affluence, greater personal freedom and technological advances. Conditions which seemed so full of promise also meant less purposeful activity and less challenge. Bernstein goes on to posit that there was 'a particular form of training for success for young people' that involved 'behavioural compliance' and 'repression of feelings' (Belton & Priyadarshini 2007, p. 583). This was a breeding ground for boredom.

Boredom seems to be a prevalent sensation experienced by students in high school today. A 2013 Gallup poll of 500,000 American students in Grades 5 to 12 found that nearly 8 in 10 elementary students were 'engaged' with school. By high school, this had fallen to 4 in 10. When Gallup asked teenagers in 2004 to choose the top three words that describe how they feel at school from a list of 14 adjectives, 'bored' was chosen most often, by half the students (Jason 2017). Explanations for this growing boredom in their later school years have included the emphasis on standardised testing, fading novelty of school and transition from an education based around the 'tactile and creative to the cerebral and regimented' (Jason 2017).

Alleviating Boredom

There is good reason for the causes of boredom to be explored and mitigated. Studies have shown that it can correlate with disinterest and distraction on the one hand and depression, anxiety, hostility, impulsivity and destructive behaviours on the other (Belton & Priyadarshini 2007, p. 587). Bored students are likely to experience lower grades, higher rates of absenteeism and a greater probability of dropping out of school (Weinerman & Kenner 2016, p. 18). Boredom accounts for 25% of variation in student achievement — about the same percentage attributed to intelligence (Koerth-Baker 2016). So what can we do about it?

Firstly, take it seriously. Jal Mehta, an Associate Professor at the Harvard School of Education, has studied student engagement for a decade. He says, 'We have to stop seeing boredom as a frilly side effect. It is a central issue. Engagement is a precondition for learning' (Jason 2017). He argues that teachers who inculcate interest do two things: trust students to sometimes control the class and enable students to see the purpose of tasks 'that would make the necessary boredom endurable' (Jason 2017). Far from advocating teachers as entertainers, he promotes student involvement in decisions and the explanation of task relevance.

A study by Cui, Yao and Zhang (2017) found that teacher enthusiasm for their subject and for teaching was one of the most important qualities that positively affected student enjoyment and achievement. Significant for our purposes, the study found that enthusiastic teachers did the two things recommended by Jal Mehta: they provided students with more autonomy and they enabled students to see the value of the tasks they were performing. If 'boredom occurs when drama fails' (Belton & Priyadharshini 2007, p. 586), then enthusiastic teachers provide drama that is viewed by students not as superficial adornment but as in fact crucial to their learning.

Research conducted by Csikszentmihalyi (Belton & Priyadharshini 2007, p. 591) led to the notion of 'flow' that can be seen as a remedy for boredom. He used the term to identify the state experienced by someone who is completely absorbed in an activity he or she finds inherently enjoyable. Flow involves a sense of discovery, exploration, problem-solving and 'losing oneself' or feeling close social connections. Csikszentmihalyi argued that flow occurred when an individual's skill matched the challenge and opportunity presented, according to their perception.

The research agrees about how to prevent boredom that stultifies students and inhibits learning. There is no support for teachers becoming entertainers, filling space with frenetic activity, changing tasks regularly and injecting excitement. There is support for teachers increasing student agency and altering student perception about tasks they complete so that they see value and relevance. Intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation is key.

Embracing Boredom

As educators, we experience almost a compulsion to alleviate boredom. At some point or other we have all experienced the slack-mouthed, glazed-eye audience and the feeling of failure it elicits. We know that engaged students are effective learners. We know that working hard to design lessons with a variety of tasks that provide something for every learner is good. We use videos and quizzes and whiteboards and posters and games to spice up our lessons. We hope that our students are telling the other students that we are fun and that our subject is interesting.

However, in avoiding boredom at all costs, we might be doing our students a disservice, because we all know that boredom is inevitable at some point (indeed, if we are honest, at many points) at school and in life. We can give our students a gift by enabling them to be bored sometimes and by teaching them the benefits that come from perseverance through and reappraisal of undesirable circumstances.

Boredom can have extraordinary potential. As an indication that something is unsatisfactory, it can act as a prompt to exploring new opportunities. It can lead to dramatic rethinking and reshaping. It can trigger creativity and resourcefulness. It has been recently seen as a 'lost art form' that is redolent with possibility. Psychotherapist Adam Phillips is critical of adults who quash boredom. Belton and Priyadharshini (2007, p. 589) quote Phillips (2017) where he notes that:

Often the child's boredom is met by that most perplexing form of disapproval, the adult's wish to distract him — as though the adults have decided that the child's life must be, or be seen to be, endlessly interesting. When the child's boredom is often recognised as an incapacity, it is usually denied as an opportunity.

Philosopher Bertrand Russell argues that adults should be wary of providing their children with too much excitement lest they become incapable of enduring what he termed 'fruitful monotony' (Popova 2015).

Boredom can deliver another great benefit — the skill of contemplation. Zeigler (2004) writes:

Our society tells us that we need stuff to do, but sometimes we do so much stuff and have so much stuff that we don't have any time to think about all the important stuff.

Subjecting students to constant activity and optimising every spare moment of their time can rob them of the space and the desire to indulge in inward activities of observation and reflection, of experiencing stillness within. This enables students the time to respond rather than react. It is a vital feature of a productive life. As Paul (2019) puts it, 'It's when you are bored that stories set in.'

A capacity for boredom is beneficial for everyone. It is also essential for those who want to achieve excellence. If you want to be a great pianist, you need to practise your scales, regularly and indefinitely. If you want to make scientific discoveries, you need to engage in testing many times over many months. If you want to win the trophy you need to run the same distance over and over. Mark Bauerlein (cited in Jason 2017) writes that an overemphasis on engagement may 'stunt students' for college, where pushing through tedious work is required to advance. 'In telling [students], 'You think the material is pointless and musty, but we'll find ways to stimulate you,' high school educators fail to teach them the essential skill of exerting oneself even when bored' (Jason 2017).

Bauerlein makes a salient point. A key consequence of students enduring boredom is that they learn how to endure. Challenging and undesirable tasks will come to us all. How much better if we have learnt a measure of self-control and self-discipline so we can grapple with the task ahead and persevere? In a 2014 study, researchers asked people to sit in a room with nothing to do for 15 minutes. Some of the participants, particularly men, preferred to give themselves small electric shocks rather than be left alone with their thoughts (Koerth-Baker 2016). We can respond constructively to boredom, but unless we are faced with a healthy diet of it at school and in the home, we will never learn how.

There are lessons here for educators. We need not cave in to those who tell us that students can't absorb material that is wordy or lengthy, can't listen without interaction, can't reflect without activity. We can train students to appreciate the value of these tasks as we witness the benefits of students who endure, create, improve and access their inner world.

Conclusion

How do we reconcile boredom as a poison and a stimulant? How can we both avoid it and encourage it? As educators, we need to put boredom in its appropriate place. Boredom that issues from disengaged teachers who mandate tasks that appear meaningless, whether compounded by an absence of activity or hyper-activity, is diabolical for student learning. Boredom by design delivered by enthusiastic teachers enhances student learning. These teachers give meaning and value to challenging tasks, they facilitate student autonomy, they embrace tedium as a means to develop perseverance and skill, and they pour into empty spaces the fullness of reflection and dreaming. Let us put boredom in its appropriate place in our classrooms.

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